Center for Immigration Studies

Backgrounder

February 2001

Ethnicity, Immigration, and The American National Community

By Tony Smith

In his State of the Union Address of February 9, 1997, President Bill Clinton declared that a major theme of his second administration would be to address the ethnic tensions that abound in American life, attempting to bridge them where it was possible with a sense of a common national identity and destiny that would make our differences a source of strength instead of weakness. "All over the world, people are being torn asunder by racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts that fuel fanaticism and terrors," he declared. "We are the world's most diverse democracy. And the world looks to us to show that it is possible to live and advance together across those kinds of differences. America has always been a nation of immigrants....We started as an experiment in democracy fueled by Europeans. We have grown into an experiment in democratic diversity fueled by openness and promise...We must never believe that diversity is a weakness — it is our greatest strength."

Yet less than six months later, on June 14, 1997, the President implicitly recognized that "our greatest strength" also contained serious problems as he called for an "honest dialogue" about race in the country. Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* criticized Clinton for being vague on specifics, long on good-hearted intentions. Haven't we been talking about this issue for generations, they asked? Are we any closer to agreement today on complex and vexing questions than we were over 30 years ago when Presidents Kennedy and Johnson launched a renewed national debate on these matters?

The focus of Clinton's remarks had to do with domestic relations, in education and jobs especially. But his words could be applied equally well to international relations in a manner that transcended his own presidency:

> *"Can we be one America, respecting, even celebrating our differences, but embracing even more what we have in common? Can we define what it means to be an American, not just in terms of the hyphens showing our ethnic origins, but in terms of our primary allegiance to the values America stands for?"*

Today, the most contentious issue fueling debates about the rights and obligations of citizens in democracies has to do with the call of what are usually referred to as social identity groups - ethnic and racial groups in particular, but also those based on religion or gender - to have collective political voice, claims sometimes summed up as "group differentiated citizenship rights." Here is the issue concerning the meaning of citizenship that President Bill Clinton correctly asserted to be an unresolved ethical matter of vital daily concern confronting not only America but democracies everywhere. Both from the viewpoint of practical politics and from the perspective of

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This essay is based on the introduction and chapters one and four of Foreign Attachments: Ethnic Power in the Making of American Foreign Policy *(Harvard University Press, 2000) by Tony Smith. Tony Smith is Cornelia M. Jackson Professor of Political Science at Tufts University and was the Whitney Shepardson Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations for the academic year of 1997-1998. His other works include* America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century; Thinking like a Communist: State and Legitimacy in the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba; *and* The Pattern of Imperialism: The United States, Great Britain, and the Late-Industrializing World since 1815.

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We must recognize that there is a dilemma in democratic pluralism that common national interests also are to be served, and that on occasion what ethnic minorities call for and what the greater community needs may be in contradiction to one another.

democratic theory, the nature of "multicultural" citizenship (a term virtually synonymous with multiethnicity) is for American policymakers today on the forefront of the political agenda.

Ethnicity: A Driving Force

To be sure, the most dramatic cases of ethnic demands raising issues of historical and humanitarian importance do not concern the world's democracies. As the momentous collapse of first the Soviet empire then the Soviet Union itself, once again underscored, ethnic solidarity and ethnic hatreds have been one of the most critical political facts of our century. Ethnicity was an important part of the dynamic of both world wars and of decolonization, as well as of the collapse of Soviet communism. Again, in terms of humanitarian disasters, the ethnic murders in the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Kosovo especially) and different parts of Africa (but most notably Rwanda and Burundi) are unsurpassed in recent times. They immediately recall the Jewish Holocaust and the Armenian genocide, the most tragic examples of race murder in our century.

Yet despite winning the wars against fascism and communism, the democratic world has no clear answer either to many of the difficult questions raised by multicultural citizenship. India remains plagued by problems of ethnic violence and separatist movements. No one is sure what will happen due to ethnic tensions in South Africa with Nelson Mandela not in power. As if Israel's antagonism with the Muslim world were not great enough, now cultural differences suggestive of ethnic cleavages within Judaism are coming to seriously strain politics there. So, too, as democratic openings proceed to gain strength in Latin America, long-suppressed racial issues concerning African and indigenous populations quickly become matters of passionate political debate.

Even in prosperous and consolidated democracies like Canada or Belgium, ethnic cleavages threaten national partition. Or again, the many millions of migrants from North Africa and Turkey entering Germany and France; from the Caribbean and South Asia entering Great Britain; and from Asia, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America entering the United States, create issues that are new and volatile in all of these countries. In short, while democracies have shown themselves to be considerably better than totalitarian or authoritarian orders at handling internal ethnoracial differences, they nonetheless confront serious long-term problems that cannot be avoided, for the very dynamic of democratic citizenship that empowers all elements of the population — the right to freedom of speech, assembly, and election — now has brought them to the fore. It may be true that democracy's strengths have to date softened the edge of ethnic hatred relative to the world's authoritarian systems, but do the democracies know how to overcome their internal divisions, how, indeed, to empower themselves in the process? It is prudent to be modest in reply.

The question of ethnic empowerment in an age of multiculturalism concerns many aspects of the U.S. role in world affairs. American Muslims and Jews have a special concern for events in the Middle East; American Greeks and Armenians have made common cause with respect to proper U.S. policy in the Eastern Mediterranean; American blacks called for Jean-Baptiste Aristide to be returned to power in Haiti after a military coup there in 1991, while pushing for the democratization of sub-Saharan Africa; American Irish have favored Washington's involvement in the peace process in Northern Ireland; Central European Americans have backed the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to provide a security shield for their kinfolk formerly under Russian control; and both Asian and Latino Americans, concerned as they are with the well-being of their families still abroad, have focused on the character of this country's immigration laws.

Yet understandable as these ethnic concerns are, and legitimate as it is in a democracy for ethnic groups to seek influence to promote their agendas, we must recognize that there is a dilemma in democratic pluralism that common national interests also are to be served, and that on occasion what ethnic minorities call for and what the greater community needs may be in contradiction to one another. One problem is that in a multicultural era such as we have today, ethnic groups are often far better at articulating their right to voice than at recognizing their obligations to the national community.

Democracy's built-in dilemma is well put by Robert Dahl, the best known contemporary theorist of American pluralism, noting for our era the inevitable

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consequences of what James Madison, in the tenth of the Federalist Papers, called "the mischiefs of faction":

"Whenever democratic processes are employed on a scale as large as the nation-state, autonomous organizations are bound to come into existence. They are more, however, than a direct consequence of democratizing the government of the nation-state. They are also necessary to the functioning of the democratic process itself, to minimizing government coercion, to political liberty, and to human well-being. Yet as with individuals, so with organizations; independence or autonomy...creates an opportunity to do harm. Organizations may use the opportunity to increase or perpetuate injustice rather than reduce it, to foster the narrow egotism of their members at the expense of concerns for a broader public good, and even to weaken or destroy democracy itself."

A major difficulty confronting any effort to juxtapose minority to majority rights involves the need to specify just what "national interests" are, seldom a matter free of debate. It would be absurd to claim that something called the national interest is obvious at every point in time and that all true Americans should rally round it. Political debates should allow for reasonable persons to disagree with one another without any suggestion of disloyalty. Still, the concept of the "common," "collective," "general," or "public" good — that is, the "national interest or interests" — is an essential notion for any democratic people, one that is not suspended by invocation of special interest rights under pluralism. As even a casual acquaintance with political life will suggest, the effort of the few to commit the many to a course of action designed to benefit only a small sector of the population at the expense of the entire nation is one of the commonplaces of democratic life. Consequently, a theory of democratic pluralism must have some grounds on which to assert the common cause.

As indicated above, there are many domestic and foreign policy issues where differences between ethnic and national interests might be debated. For discussion here, however, let us focus on only one of these, the question of the country's immigration laws, with special attention, for the sake of greater specificity, to Mexican immigration.

The Debate over Mexican Immigration

Debates are ferocious on the matter of whether the United States gains or loses from Mexican immigration. One need not endorse the extremist, indeed nativist-xenophobic, reactions of some in this country - for example, Peter Brimelow's offensive assertion that

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"current immigration policy is Adolf Hitler's posthumous revenge on America [for it may] destroy the one unquestioned victor of World War II: the American nation...Today, U.S. government policy is literally dissolving the people and electing a new one" — to recognize that there are at least three reasons to be skeptical that such a large number of Mexican immigrants is an unmixed blessing.

First, most Mexican migrants are largely uneducated and unskilled. Their arrival may depress wages for other poor groups in the United States. Special sectors of the economy surely benefit from their labor, which is the reason some business groups want the immigration to continue (and also oppose employer-verification measures). But viewed from the perspective of the income distribution, which today is becoming increasingly polarized (or shaped like an "hour glass" as the middle class declines), and from the point of view of America as a "post-industrial" economy where decently paid manufacturing jobs are declining, there is an argument to be made that immigration of this kind of labor is socially regressive.

Will the problem be eased by the fact that Mexican Americans often call for affirmative action treatment in employment? At its origin, affirmative action was designed to redress the historically based grievances of communities that had been deliberately marginalized by mainstream society: Native Americans, blacks, and Chicanos. But with the tide of Mexican and Central American immigration riding on the current legislation, literally millions of new immigrants who have not been the victims of this country's past discriminatory policies, may find themselves privileged over white Americans in considerations for jobs. Neither morally nor practically is there much to be said in defense of these actions, supported as they may be by an ever more powerful Mexican American lobby.

A second consideration with respect to immigration is that a liberal policy may often be bad for the Mexicans who come, given the inhospitality of the

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American wage and educational system to unskilled immigrants. Low wages mean that migrants frequently work two jobs; family structures may weaken; the second (or third) generation joins the American underclass. Some recent statistics show that Hispanic youth (and Mexicans especially) are much more likely than the general population not to complete high school. Even when adjustments are made to discount recent arrivals, the same figures show that American-born Hispanics are suffering a real decline in their standard of living and now rank at the bottom of the American ethnic hierarchy in terms of income. High levels of teenage pregnancy and gang violence relative to other sectors of the population are inevitable results. I have heard people who oppose current levels of Mexican immigration called "racists," but there is an argument to be made that is quite the opposite — that those who promote this immigration are more truly insensitive to the genuine well-being of Mexicans.

Finally, there is the political question: the great majority of Mexican Americans prefer to live in the Southwest — California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. From the point of view of some of their historians, these lands could be considered Mexican, taken as they were from Mexico by Texas independence in 1836 and the war that was concluded on American terms in 1848. No matter that these territories had fewer than 80,000 Mexicans in them at the time they joined the Union. As names like Los Angeles and Santa Fe, San Antonio and Sacramento suggest, Mexican these lands were and Mexican they may once again become (unless the country of "Aztlan" is set up, as some hope).

Even now, electoral reapportionment strengthens their political presence as illegal as well as legal immigration affects congressional representation. In a study completed late in 1998, the Center for Immigration Studies found that the census of 1990 and 2000 is or would lead to 13 seats being lost by Louisiana, Michigan, Montana, and Ohio (after 1990) and by Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin (after 2000) thanks to illegal as well as legal immigration.

National Identity and Loyalty

It is of real importance to underscore the national identity and loyalties of Americans of Mexican descent. I do not agree with those who foresee a time when Mexican Americans will come to consider themselves as the Quebecois consider themselves in Canada: a conquered people with rights to self-government that will rectify their second-class economic status. Yet some of their intellectuals clearly want to persuade them to think in these terms. For example, Rodolfo Acuna entitles his book *Occupied America,* and he implies that all the Mexican Americans living today in the lands taken by the United States in 1848 are descendant from those there then, whereas surely fewer than 5 percent of them are. Accordingly, he entitles his first chapter "Legacy of Hate" declaring in his opening:

> *"The tragedy of the Mexican cession is that most Anglo-Americans have not accepted the fact that the United States committed an act of violence against the Mexican people when it took Mexico's southwestern territory. Violence was not limited to taking the land. Mexico's territory was invaded, her people murdered, her land raped, and her possession plundered. Memory of this destruction generated a distrust and dislike that is still vivid in the minds of many Mexicans, for the violence of the United States left deep scars. And for Chicanos — Mexicans remaining within the boundaries of the new United States territories — aggression was even more insidious, for the outcome of the Texas and the Mexican-American wars made them a conquered people."*

Acuna's is not an isolated voice. A four part KCET-Los Angeles TV documentary entitled *Chicanos!*, produced in 1996 and narrated by Henry Cisneros, opens with scenes making charges against the legitimacy of U.S. sovereignty over the region that stretches from Texas to California that sound borrowed from Acuna's book. Peter Skerry opens his book on Mexican Americans providing other examples of these contentious claims.

Organized Mexican American interest groups are not united in the position they take on the question of immigration and dual citizenship — nor is the Mexican American citizenry of one mind. Most Mexican Americans today identify with many core American values (indeed they may well exceed their fellow Americans in terms of commitment to the work ethic and family values), and even if they think of themselves as an ethnicity, are also confident of their identity as Americans. Many of them may recognize a need to limit immigration as well in their own economic interest. But in October 1996, the first Hispanic March on Washington occurred, when perhaps 30,000 demonstrators made a list of demands

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on the government. Among these were amnesties for undocumented aliens currently here, demands for control of the border police that can easily be read as loosening restraints on immigration, and calls for affirmative action consideration for these new arrivals. By arguing against employer verification schemes and national identity cards designed to restrict illegal immigration, and by calling for generous family reunification plans for legal immigrants, some Hispanic organizations — supported by the Catholic church, some business interests, libertarians like the Cato Institute, and the Ford Foundation — were calling for measures that others find for good reason erode the country's ability to control its borders.

It is difficult to stake out a reasoned, moderate multiculturalist position given the nativists on one side, prophesying doom in the face of the current wave of immigration, and the immigrants-rights groups themselves acting as deeply offended parties, their cultural identities under siege. Nevertheless, Peter H. Schuck makes such an attempt, stating as his credo, "Immigration, including the post-1965 wave, has served America well. If properly regulated, there is every reason to expect that it will continue to do so."

The trick comes, of course, in laws that "properly regulate" immigration, and Schuck apparently has sympathy for those he calls "pragmatic restrictionists," people who believe that "immigration's actual effects on population, the environment, national unity, cultural consensus, and so forth are empirical questions whose answers depend on a variety of factors...[people who] are open to argument and evidence about what those levels should be and about what immigration's actual effects are."

Empirical Evidence

In line with Schuck's suggestion, it is possible to identify a series of concerns open to empirical investigation raised by immigration since 1965.

- The empirical evidence on the educational and skill level of many immigrants, especially from Mexico and Central America, which, given the current structure of American economic life, may at one and the same time put them in direct competition with the poor (especially blacks) in American society, while sentencing the immigrants themselves to a future in the American underclass;

- The empirical evidence of high school drop out rates and teenage pregnancy suggesting that second and third generation immigrant families of Mexican and Central American descent may be faring poorly in America today;

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- The empirical evidence that a sustained effort is underway to reinforce ethnic at the expense of national thinking as group-centered rights have replaced those conferred on individuals, the result, in turn, of ethnic entrepreneurs who promote bilingualism and measures favoring political redistricting that may balkanize society, and who try to extend affirmative action protection from historically discriminated against American groups (principally Native and African Americans) to Latino newcomers;

- The ethical appropriateness of high rates of illegal immigration and of extending automatic citizenship to the at least 75,000 babies born of illegal aliens every year, and the empirical evidence on the practical problems posed by the high crime rate among illegal aliens and the difficulties set in the way of controlling these influxes of foreigners by the political activism of their ethnic kinfolk already here.

All of these problems are compounded by particular problems posed by dual nationality, which Mexicans resident in the United States have enjoyed since a Mexican law came into effect in March 1998. Previously, Mexicans who had adopted U.S. citizenship lost a number of legal rights in their ancestral homeland. Now some three million Mexicans who are legal residents in this country may naturalize. A Mexican American population already more than 15 million strong stands to expand by several million — with perhaps an additional two to three million, should undocumented aliens be given a general amnesty as some in the Mexican American community are hoping.

The point of this discussion is not to come to a final decision as to what American immigration law should be — although the debates are serious and bear

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There should be no question but that such groups have a right in a democracy to organize themselves around whatever matters they see fit. But alongside this right they also have an obligation to recognize that interests of the greater national community may conflict with their ethnic preferences, without, for all that, damaging charges of "unAmerican" or "racist" be freely traded back and forth.

comparisons with what is going on in Western Europe as well — but instead to ask how to formulate the law in a way that respects the dignity of immigrant cultures while recognizing that there may be a national interest in controlling our borders much more tightly than is now the case. Even those who declare themselves in favor of continued high rates of immigration may object strongly to many aspects of the process as it is currently structured, and so may resemble Schuck's "pragmatic restrictionist." To date, multiculturalist thinkers have not aided this important and sensitive debate. To the contrary, by celebrating hyphenation, dual-, and post-national citizenship, multiculturalists have instead encouraged the indignation of Latinos who feel their culture is being unfairly stigmatized, and they have by the same token validated the all-too-easy belief that those who feel immigration is a critical issue for the future social and political culture of this nation are simply racists.

This discussion of Mexican American influence over U.S. immigration laws is only one of the many issues where ethnic groups mobilize to influence foreign policy determinations in Washington. There should be no question but that such groups have a right in a democracy to organize themselves around whatever matters they see fit. But alongside this right they also have an obligation to recognize that interests of the greater national community may conflict with their ethnic preferences, without, for all that, damaging charges of "unAmerican" or "racist" be freely traded back and forth. Resolving the contradiction between particular and general interests and values will never be easy, for it is inscribed in the logic of democratic government. But frankly recognizing that pluralism has its contradictions is a major step toward dealing with them more constructively, as the debate over proper immigration laws for the Republic so clearly illustrates.

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Tony Smith, in *Foreign Attachments*, observes that "Today, the most contentious issue fueling debates about the rights and obligations of citizens in democracies has to do with the call of what are usually referred to as social identity groups — ethnic and racial groups in particular, but also those based on religion or gender — to have collective political voice, claims sometimes summed up as 'group differentiated citizenship rights.' Here is the issue concerning the meaning of citizenship that President Bill Clinton correctly asserted to be an unresolved ethical matter of vital daily concern confronting not only America but democracies everywhere. Both from the viewpoint of practical politics and from the perspective of democratic theory, the nature of "multicultural" citizenship (a term virtually synonymous with multiethnicity) is for American policymakers today on the forefront of the political agenda."